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This story is taken from Mrs. Stuart's book, *A Golden Wedding, and Other Stories*, published by Harper & Brothers.

THE HOUSEHOLD WAS PREPARED FOR 'EM, EVEN DOWN TO TOM

THE WOMAN'S EXCHANGE OF SIMPKINSVILLE

By

Ruth McEnery Stuart

NEW YORK AND LONDON
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THE WOMAN'S EXCHANGE OF SIMPKINSVILLE

The Woman's Exchange of Simpkinsville

SONNY'S BIRDS

"I 'VE been kissed once-t—with a reg'lar beau kiss—by Teddy Brooks." The puffs of smoke from old lady Sarey Mirandy Simpkins's pipe came faster after she had spoken.

"But I never kissed back. Hev you ever been kissed that a-way, 'th a reg'lar beau kiss, sis' Sophia Falena?" she continued, turning toward her sister, who sat, also smoking, beside her.

"Twice-t."

"Who by?"

"Once-t by Jim Halloway, time he spoken the word fo' me to marry

'im, an'—an' by another person for a far'well."

"An' you kep' two all these years an' never told 'em out, an' here I felt guilty a-hidin' one. Who was that various secon' smartie what done it to you, sis?"

"He were n't no smartie, Sarey Mirandy. He were Jim Dooley, an' it were time he 'listed in the army."

"Did you kiss back, Sophia Falena?"

"*Yas—I—did!* But what put kissin' into yo' head to-night, sis? It 's mighty funny, 'cause I was a-settin' here thinkin' 'bout kissin' too—an' I can't tell when I 've studied about sech a thing befo'."

"I dunno. I was jest a-thinkin'. Sometimes it do me good to set an' think 'way back."

"Well, I tell you how I reckon kissin' come into *my* head. I was jest a-thinkin' *s'posin'*."

"S'posin' what, sis?"

"Well, s'posin' all 'round. S'posin' Jim Dooley had of came back from the wah, fo' one thing."

A faint blush suffused the thin face of the speaker at the very audacity of that which her supposition implied.

"An' s'posin' Sonny had n't of taken to birds—an' died. An' s'posin' the bank had n't o' failed. Why, sis, I could set here an' s'pose things in five minutes thet 'd make everything different. S'posin' time Teddy Brooks give you thet special an' pertic'lar kiss, *you* had jest—ef not to say kissed back, not *drawed away* neither. S'posin' that?"

"Well, sis, since we got on the subjec', I 've supposened it more 'n once-t—pertic'lar sence I see how ol' an' run-down the pore feller is. Sally Ann Jones 'ain't been even to say a half-way wife to 'im. Seem like ev'ry time she lays a new baby in the cradle fo' him to rock she gets

fatter an' purtier an' mo' no' 'count; an' pore Teddy he sets an' rocks the flesh clean off'n his bones. Yas, sis, I 've thought o' *that* s'posin' many a time, but it 's a vain an' foolish thought—ef not a ongodly one. But the one I 've s'posened about most is Sonny."

Both women sighed. "Somehow I can't get used to thinkin' 'bout Sonny dyin', noways. No two girls ever had a better brother 'n Sonny. Sonny was a born genius, ef th' ever was one. Perfesser Sloane down to Spring Hill say hisself they war n't a young man in the county thet helt a candle to Sonny fo'head-learnin'—not to speak o' Sonny's manners. An' when I set an' look at this houseful o' stuffed birds in glass cases an' think o' what Sonny might 'a' been— Well, maybe it was God's will for Sonny to take to birds, stid o' drink or card-shufflin' like some brothers."

"It 's mighty funny, sis, for you an' me to be sett'n' up here s'posin' an' lookin' back at this pertic'lar time, when it so p'intedly behooves us to be lookin' ahead. Lemme see that paper ag'in. Yas, here it is in plain 'Merican: 'Failure of the Cotton King's Bank of Little Rock'—a whole colume. Nobody to read that would think of its sett'n' two ol' women to studyin' 'bout kissin', now, would they? What you reckon we better do, sis?"

"God on'y knows—an' He 'ain't tol' me—yet. 'T would n't be no use to try takin' boa'ders, would it?"

"'T would n't be right, sis. They ain't nobody in town *to* boa'd out but them as are boa'din' a'ready, an' 't would be jest the same as askin' 'em to leave an' come to us—'special as we got the fines' house."

"'T would look that a-way, would n't it? I thought about takin' in

quiltin', but there ag'in, you know, th' ain't mo' quiltin' give out to be did than Mis' Gibbs can do—an' she half crippled, too. No, no. 'Fore I 'd give out thet you an' me 'd take in quiltin', I 'd starve—*that* I would."

"I taken notice to a pertic'lar word you spoke jest now, sis, 'bout 'God knows.' You recollec' what the hymn say?

'Hev we trial or temptation,
Take it to the Lord in prayer.'

Seem to me like our trial 's been followed by two temptations a'ready. It 's mos' nine o'clock, an' I 'm go-in' to read my chapter, an' then lay this case o' you an' me out clear, on my knees, befo' the Lord; an' do you do the same, sis, an' I b'lieve we 'll be d'rected."

Lighting her candle, old lady Sophia passed noiselessly into her own room. Her sister sat for some

time longer in thought, then she too, after shovelling some ashes over the coals upon the hearth, took her candle and went to bed.

The Misses Simpkins were twins, and at the time of the civil war they had been fair blooming country maidens, both, and they were now, since the death, a year ago, of "Sonny," their bachelor brother, the sole representatives of a family that had stood with the best in the Arkansas community in which they lived; a family whose standards and traditions had been religiously observed in all things by the twin daughters upon whose frail maiden shoulders had developed responsibilities hitherto unknown to the women of the name of Simpkins. Their mother and grandmother had had slaves at their call, and by frugal care had accumulated what here in those days was counted as wealth.

They had worn their inherited

frugality itself threadbare in the determination to "live like pa an' ma would like to have us live," and thus far they had succeeded.

Sonny, whose life, viewed retrospectively, seemed even to their loving eyes a failure, had been, when living, their pride and joy. Sonny was, in truth, a gentleman. His one year at college, which he left for the army in '61, had sufficed to introduce him into new realms of thought, and, it may be, had diverted activity from his hands to his brain. Certain it is that he never practically grasped the changed situation after the war, and the sisters and he had finally sold all the farm lands, reserving only the few acres surrounding the homestead. The proceeds, deposited in the failing bank, had yielded an income quite adequate to their modest needs.

Sonny had called himself a naturalist; and so he was—in a sweeter,

broader sense than he knew. He was, as nature had made him, a true-hearted, unsophisticated gentleman. For more than twenty years he had been satisfied to pursue his chosen study, and take no note of time.

But Sonny was found one day, with a live bird still grasped in his hand, lying dead beneath a tree. Presumably he had climbed and fallen.

And now to the lonely sisters had come a second trial. Into their shadowed door had stalked unbidden and unexpected the informal guest called Poverty, with her startling command of "Work!"

It was dinner-time on the day following the conversation recorded before they reverted to the theme again.

"Well," said Miss Sarey Mirandy, "hev anything come to you, sis, thet we can do?"

"Hev anything come to you, sis Sarey dear?"

"Yas, it has. An' I 'm 'fraid it 's small comfort. Th' ain't but two things I can do, an' them 's sewin' an' cookin'. Th' ain't any more sewin' needin' to be did in Simpkinsville 'n them as are a'ready doin' it can do, an' as fo' cookin', you know how much chance they is in that—'less 'n a person 'd hire out, which I *can't* do—not while ma and pa's ile-painted po'trait looks down from that chimbly at you an' me. Tell the truth, sis, what *to* do I *don't* know. Hev you thought 'bout it consider'ble?"

"Yas, I have, sis. You can cook an' sew, an' I can ca'culate figgurs, an' we got a-plenty o' house-room, an' we 're right on the public road, an'—"

"In the name o' goodness, sis hun, 're you wanderin', or what 're you drivin' at?"

"Well, they 's jest this much to it, sis Sarey Mirandy: I 've got a

idee; an' *my* idee is thet it 's *the* idee—an' that 's all they is *to* it."

Miss Sarey Mirandy readjusted her spectacles and scrutinized her sister's face. "Well, go on, honey. You 've done got me wrought up!"

"Why, it 's this—and I 'd never o' thought o' sech a thing if it had n't o' been for my trip to the city, along with me subscribin' to that magazine, both of which, you know, hun, you pretty solemn discountenanced. I seen it tried in the city, an' the magazine is continual tellin' how it works everywhere."

"But for gracious sakes alive, sis, what is the thing?"

"*It 's a Woman's Exchange*—that 's what it is!"

"But, sis hun, we 'ain't got nothin' to start it with."

"That 's jest the beauty of it. They get started on nothin'. We jest give out thet the Exchange *is started*, an' everybody who does any

sort o' work to sell sends it in, an' we sell it for her an' *de*duc' ten pre cent. You see ?"

"Well, I dunno as I do."

"Well, here: S'posin' ol' Mis' Gibbs, 'stid o' totin' her heavy comforters all 'round the county, an' losin' maybe two whole days' time a-sellin' one for two dollars, jest sends 'em in here, an' we sell 'em for her. She gets—ten from one dollar leaves ninety cents, an' nine an' nine 's eighteen, eight an' carry one—She gets—"

"You don't mean she gets eight dollars ? 'T would n't never do in the world. People would n't pay it. An', besides, I thought you said she would n't have to carry none ?"

"Don't put me out, sis; I 'm all frustrated—'f I jest had a slate! Now I got it! You don't carry at all. Ought 's a ought, an' nine an' nine 's eighteen. She 'd get a dollar

'n' eighty cents, an' we 'd get the two dimes. Then you could put any kind o' cooked things in an' sell 'em. Them lemon pies o' yours 'd sell like hot cakes."

"An' who 'd get the pre cent. on them, sis?"

"Well, reely, hun, I—I hardly know. We got to deal fair. We might give it to charity. How 'd it do to give it to Mis' Gibbs to make up the *de*duc' on the comforts?"

"That might do—if it 's got to be give; but look 's if it would nachelly *b'long* somewheres, don't it?"

"It do seem so. Maybe we might keep that fo' rent o' the room."

"Well, I dunno. Ef we do, we had ought to give it out, so every person 'd understand."

"That 's so. Of course. Well, how 'll we start, hun?"

"Why not hev it called out

in church? It's a good helpful work."

And so it was done.

When, on Sunday following, the minister stepped aside to read the notice, Miss Sophia Falena grew so flurried that she untied her bonnet strings and fanned vigorously. Her sister, however, though sniffling vociferously herself, nudged her, and she tied them again, and only cleared her throat at short intervals. The notice simply called a meeting of all interested in the project, which was duly set forth, on the next day at the Simpkins residence.

The response was most encouraging; all the chairs in the house and one from the kitchen being called into requisition to seat the attendants. Miss Sophia's voice trembled distinctly, as did the hand that held the paper from which she read, standing in the midst of the assembly, her "idees on the subjec',"

which she had thought best to commit to paper.

The meeting was in all respects a success. Besides the assorted bits of advice which all gave freely on the spot, each promised to "enter" something. While Miss Sophia Falena, an atlas balanced upon her knee, made a note of articles promised, Miss Sarey Mirandy passed around raspberry-vinegar and crullers on an old silver-plated tray.

The two were similarly attired in gowns of shiny black silk, whose swishing sound at every movement seemed, with the clink of the high goblets against the silver waiter, reminiscent of a by-gone and more prosperous period.

The change wrought in the Simpkins household by the new enterprise was marvellous.

It was as if time had turned backward and they were young again, so quickly did they move about, so

animatedly discuss the numerous details of preparation.

After considerable parley, they decided to use the mahogany centre table for cakes and articles of special showiness, while fancy-work could be advantageously displayed on the piano. If the time should come again when they cared to hear music in the house, they could move the things. Miss Sophia, who had been from home more than her sister, hated to open the old piano anyway. Indeed, she was once heard to say: "When that *pi*ano is shut an' kivered up, a person can look at it an' think music, 'cause the shape seems to favor it; but jest open it, an' I declare Methusalem ain't nowheres. It makes a person ponder on death an' *e*ternity."

The Exchange opened briskly. The centre table fairly groaned beneath its burden of cakes: "White Mountain," "Lady Washington,"

"Confederate layer," "Marble," "Dolly Varden," "General Lee," and a score of others, iced, and decorated with reckless elaboration; while in the centre, completing the effect of a spread feast, stood—under glass, it is true—a glowing pyramid of wax fruits.

The piano was a bazar of many-hued zephyrs, from the miniature sacques and stockings of shrimp pink and kindred raw tints relegated by provincial taste to the adorning of babes, to the chinchilla and purple capes suggestive of grandmothers' rheumatic shoulders.

On a side table, wrapped in snowy linen, were heaped loaves of home-made bread, buns, rolls, lemon pies —the home contribution.

A stream of people were coming all day, examining things, pricing, but rarely buying. Indeed, nearly all had something in stock *to sell.*

The two old ladies flitted briskly

about, ever and anon putting their heads together, only to dart off in other directions, as busy and buzzy as two happy house flies on a sunny day, only the bright red spots on their cheeks testifying to the unusual agitation of their minds. That they had need of tact, discretion, and judgment, not to mention patience, a bit of conversation caught up at random will perhaps best illustrate:

"An' who in the Kingdom sent in this curious cake, Miss Simpkins?" The querist was a patroness of influence.

"Kate Clark sent in that 'n', Mis' Blanks. It 's a 'Will-o'-the-wisp,' made out 'n five times sifted flour, 'n' whites of eggs. She says she *made it up*, name an' all."

"Seem to me she 'd have 'bout all she could do makin' up rhymin' po'try. What price does she put on it?"

"She would n't name no sum.

She says she never prices the work of her mind in money, an' thet cake is jest the same to her as a po'try verse. She 'll be grateful for whatever it 'll fetch."

"Well, I vow! Time a person taken to writin' po'try, seem like they all but lose what little sense they got. How you goin' to sell it, 'thout no price?"

"Well, we 'lowed thet anybody thet 'd wanted it 'd deal *fair*. I s'pose, bein' as they 's nothin' but eggs, an' only the half o' them, in it, they mus' be consider'ble flour. An' *siftin'* it five times, you know that 's worrisome work. An' the eggs is well beat; you can see that. Don't you reck'n it 's wuth two bits?"

"Maybe it is for them as are willin' to buy a quarter's wuth o' wind. When I want air, I 'll go out dohs an' sniff it! That 's all I 'm askin' fo' mine, an' it iced all

over, an' eight whole eggs in it, an' them beat sep'rate, an' a cup o' butter, not mentionin' the other things, nur the *extrac'*. They 's a spoonful o' v'nilla extrac' in my cake if they 's a drop, for I dashed it in by my eye—an' I 've got what you call big eyes, come to measurin' food stuffs."

The speaker's little blue eyes snapped sharply, and she sniffed twice in hesitation, ere she proceeded, with some embarrassment:

"If you goin' to charge twenty-five cents fo' Kate Clark's pile o' baked bubbles—you can lift it an' see it 's nothin' else—you better rub that twenty-five off o' my iced cake, an' put a forty on it. That 's it, a four an' a ought, an' whoever buys *mine* gets four dimes' wuth o' good nour'shment, if I do say it." She moved on apace. "I see Kitty Baker 's sent in a lot o' things. Well, them as want to eat after Kitty *can*—that 's all *I* got to say."

"Kitty 's a well-meanin' girl, Mis' Blanks, an' needy, too. S'posin' you don't say nothin' like that to nobody. I see the flour *is* caked some 'roun' the edges of her cakes, but that ain't sayin' they 's anything wrong with her cookin'."

"Why, Miss Sarey *Mi*-randy Simpkins! I 'm a perfessin' Christian, as you know—an' tryin' to live up to my lights. I would n't say nothin' to injure Kitty *fo' nothin'*. These remarks I make to you is jest 'twix' you an' me an' the bed-pos'. One o' my motters is 'live an' let live,' an' another one," she added, with a laugh, "'what don't pizen fattens.' What you askin' fo' yo' lemon pies, Miss Simpkins?"

"Twenty-five cents, Mis' Blanks."

"Mh-hm! I s'pose they 're made by yo' ma's ol' receipt—three eggs to the pie, savin' out the whites to whip up fo' the top?"

"'Deed, Mis' Blanks, sis made em, an' I could n't tell you jest how she po'tioned 'em, but I know she ca'culated thet they come to eighteen cents apiece, not countin' firewood, which, sence pore Sonny 's gone, we hev to hire to have cut."

"Cert'n'y; an' yet I 'd think a little thing like a pie you could slip in whils' other things are bakin'."

"That 's so; we do; an' yet—Do you think two bits is too much for 'em, Mis' Blanks?"

"Law, child, the idee! I was jest a-thinkin' *this*. You know business is business, Miss Simpkins, an' I was jest a-thinkin'—they *can't noways* be more 'n *five* eggs in a pie, even if they was guinea eggs—an' they 's eight in my cake, *an' it iced an'* flavored. Jest rub out that *four*, please, 'm, an' put a *five* on my cake, will you? 'Cordin' to the gen'ral valliation it 's wuth a half a dollar if it 's wuth a cent. Well, I mus' be

goin'. What you chargin' fo' yo' bread, Miss Simpkins ?"

The old lady addressed scarcely found voice to answer. "Ten cents a loaf, Mis' Blanks."

"Well, you better gimme a loaf, please, 'm. You see, makin' cake an' bringin' it to the Exchange, I did n't bake to-day. I s'pose you make with salt risin', don't you ?"

"No, Mis' Blanks, we raise with 'eas'-cakes."

"Jest so it don't tas'e hoppy, I ain't pertic'lar; but from hoppy bread *de*liver me! Well, good-by, Miss Sarey Mirandy, honey—*good*-by, an' I 'm going to pray for you to succeed. Lemme know who buys my cake. I do wish I could be there to see it cut. Well, good-by again. Law! here comes Mis' Brooks with a bundle big as a Chris'mas tree. I *must* stop an' see what she 's fetch-in'. I do declare this here Woman's *Ex*change does tickle me all but *to*

death. Simpkinsville 'ain't been so stirred up sence the fire. Howdy, Mis' Brooks? I see you keepin' the ball a-movin'!"

"You better b'lieve I was n't go-in' to be outdid by all you smart seamsters an' fancy cooks."

And Teddy Brooks's wife, drawing off their loose wrappings of paper, set upon the table a gorgeous pair of old crystal candelabra.

"How 's them for antics?" she exclaimed, resting her hands upon her fat hips, and stepping backward.

These candelabra had been the proudest possession of Teddy's mother to the day of her death. To sell them seemed sacrilege to the loyal mind of Miss Sarey Mirandy.

"Are they—for sale?" she asked, with an effort at composure.

"Why, yes, indeedy; of course they 're for sale, Miss Simpkins. 'Ain't nobody else brought in no

antics? They 're the special spe-ci*al*ities they sell *in* Exchanges, antics are. I wanted to fetch over Teddy's ma's gran'ma's belluses. The wind 's all out of 'em, an' they 're no good 'cept'n' *as* antics, which I nachelly *de*spise. But Teddy taken it so hard I had to leave 'em, to keep the peace. You ask if these 're fo' sale—ain't everything here fo' sale, Miss Simpkins?"

"Ev'rything thet *is* is, of co'se, but they 's some things thet *ain't*. Sonny's birds ain't, nor pa's an' ma's ile-painted po'traits, nor none o' them things which them thet are gone seem to stan' guard over."

"Well, the way I look at that is, if the spirits thet stan' guard over things, as you say, would jest keep 'em dusted an' cobwebbed off, so 's we could be sure they *was* keepin' up with 'em, they 'd be some sense in it. Teddy took on some over

sellin' the ol' things, but I tol' him he hisself was the only Brooks antic I cared to keep. How much you reck'n I ought to get for 'em, Miss Simpkins ?"

"I 'm 'feered I was too ol' a frien' to ol' Mis' Brooks, Sally Ann, to put a price on them candelabras, but you 're at liberty to put whatever tag you like on 'em; an' sis an' me 'll do our part, fair and square. I see they 's one dangle missin' on this one."

"Yes; I give it to the baby to cut 'is eye-teeth on, an' he dropped it, an' it snapped. The things 're no manner of account. They cost a hundred dollars, an' I doubt if I 'll get ten for 'em, but I 'm goin' to start 'em at that, anyway. I 'm dyin' for a swingin' silver-plated ice-pitcher, an' have it I will. I 've got the price all to seven dollars. Teddy laid it by to have the children's pictures took, but I told him the young

ones could see their pictures in the side o' the ice-pitcher." And Mrs. Brooks laughed heartily at her own humor. "When I can swing back in my red plush rockin'-chair an' tilt ice-water out of a silver-plated pitcher, I 'll feel like some. I see you 've got lots o' goodies for sale. I 'm bound to have *somethin'* from th' Exchange for supper. What kinds have you got?" She slipped a piece of licorice-root from her pocket to her mouth as she began a circuit of the room, chewing vigorously the while. "Better do up that choc'late layer for me, Miss Simpkins," she said, finally. "Teddy don't eat choc'late, but I don' know but he 's better off 'thout cake anyway. Jes' charge it, please, to Teddy—Mr. Theodore Brooks; that 's it. Might 's well open a 'count here first as last 'f you 're goin' to have choc'late fixin's—that 's the one thing I c'd get up in my sleep

to eat. An' I don't know 's I 'll bother bakin', if you 're goin' to have bread. Jest lay by a couple o' loaves every day, please."

When Mrs. Brooks passed out, the sisters, from their opposite corners of the room, managed to exchange glances, and both sighed.

When the first day was over, all the bread and rolls were sold; indeed, nearly all the housewives who had taken this first step in bread-winning went home with bought loaves under their arms. It was only after some days, when the gorgeous array of sweets was growing stale, that the sisters and their patrons began to realize that there were no buyers of luxuries in their frugal little village.

Besides several purchases of Mrs. Brooks there had been but one cake sold. The "Will-o'-the-wisp" had passed on the second day into the possession of a certain pale young

telegraph operator—the same who was "keeping company" with its poetic fabricator.

Perhaps the materialistic circle of housewives, whose substantial contributions were further solidifying before their eyes, should be pardoned for the numerous pleasantries expended on this purchase. That the objects of their mirth, two ethereal young persons dealing professionally in commodities so unsubstantial as poetry and electricity, should choose "wind-cake" for nourishment, was a combination too prolific of humor to be passed by. The portly contributor of the still unsold eight-egg cake waxed especially facetious over it; and on the occasion of a unanimous vote of the "stockholders" to send the entire stale lot as a donation to the inmates of the poorhouse, she even went so far as to withdraw hers from them, and to bear it in her own hands as a gift to her friend the

poetess, who, she declared, should have "one good bite o' solid substance, if she never had another."

The exclusion of confections, excepting those supplied to order, practically converted the Exchange into a bakery; for the fancy department, after passing through a fading process, had shrunken through many withdrawals, until a single glass case—an unused one among Sonny's possessions—held the entire stock.

Screened from the odium of professional bread-making by the prestige of the "Exchange," the Misses Simpkins were thus enabled to earn in this simple manner a modest living. True, the vocation had its trials, but there were compensations.

If their delicate wrists and arms were decorated with a succession of bracelets in the shape of burns from the oven doors, if they agonized many nights over the intricacies of

numerous receipts sent in by kind advisers, and were oft disquieted in spirit by the vicissitudes of salt rising, compressed yeast, or potato leaven, it was yet a new youth-restoring life to be always professedly and really busy with work that left no time for repinings.

It was a sweet secret pleasure to Miss Sarey Mirandy to make the loaves Teddy Brooks paid for as large as she dared without attracting notice. And sometimes, on anniversaries—which perhaps she alone cherished—of their young days, it pleased her tender maiden heart to slip a few raisins into his loaf, with a suspicion of cinnamon, in loving memory of his boyish fancies.

For some time she was tortured with a dread that some one should offer to buy the candelabra. Should such a time come, she would calmly reply that they were already sold, when from an old stocking she would

produce one of the ten-dollar coins that represented her own funeral expenses. It should buy Teddy's wife a swinging pitcher, and the chandeliers would descend by will at her death to Teddy's daughter — his mother's namesake.

For a long time she scarcely left the house, fearing her sister should sell them during her absence. Indeed, at times she was in such a state of suppressed panic over the matter that she would gladly have bought them outright were it not for gossip. People would talk. In her calm moments she knew that no one in Simpkinsville would pay half the amount for useless old-fashioned bric-à-brac that they had seen all their lives. In fact, she had often heard the women jokingly wonder who would buy "Mis' Brooks's antics," and "if because she 'd visited in Washington"—a distant town in the State, noted for its social distinction

—" she was the only person in Simpkinsville who knowed about swingin' ice-pitchers." When they " had change to fling away, they 'd buy ice-pitchers for themselves, an' not swap it off for glass Noah's-ark dingle-dangles."

So in time Miss Sarey grew to feel pretty secure about the chandeliers, and at night, when her sister knitted or nodded beside her, she would often half close her eyes, and looking thus at the crystal pendants, seem to see, as the fire sparkled from the prisms, bright memory pictures of her youthful days. Herself, a rosy-faced girl with curls, often smiled at the retrospective old woman from the familiar scenes; and Teddy was there, and Sonny, and another—a boy who had not come home from the war—and every one was young, and the trees were green, producing nuts, berries, persimmons, or sustaining grape-vine swings, as

reminiscence required. Only the missing dangle, on which Sally Ann's baby had cut his teeth, made a painful gap in the panorama. In this vacant place Teddy, grown pale-faced and weary, seemed, somehow, always to stand, and while she looked at it, all the other pictures went out. So she would turn the defective side to the wall.

When the winter had passed, the Exchange had gone through some changes, shaping itself to the needs of the community by contraction or extension, according to indication. A few who seemed especially fitted to become at once its patrons and beneficiaries had resented its overtures as an insult, as did Mrs. Gibbs, the respected quilter of comfortables. From every point of view the Exchange was an offence unto her sensitive nostrils. To its bid for her patronage she had protested with a sniffle that "she hed never ast no

mo' 'n they was wuth fo' her quilts, an' the day she took off two dimes on one, she 'd own that she owed jest that much to every person as ever bought one. As fo' totin' the quilts around the country, she did n't know as 't was anybody's business in special. The roads was free, and she reckoned her rheumatism was her own—not but what she 'd be glad to give it to anybody that was honin' to take care of it. As to her time, she had n't bound herself out to nobody but the good Lord, an' she 'lowed to claim the time He give her till He changed it for eternity, when she guessed she 'd take that too, if the Simpkinsville folks did n't have no objections. The only visitin' she ever done was takin' orders in the spring o' the year and deliverin' her money's wuth *to a cent* in the fall. Them that thought she gadded too much was welcome to do 'thout comforts

an' freeze, jest to give her the hint."

The truth was that the social side of Mrs. Gibbs's profession was her very life. A habit of spending a day with her patrons at both ends of each transaction kept her in touch with the home lives of the people. If she had conducted her business through an agent, she would long ago have shrivelled out of existence. There was much in her work to develop an interest in what to outsiders might seem trifles, such, for instance, as which among her patrons' families kicked in their sleep; and in her social rounds it became her pleasure to discover whether the solution lay in the eating of hot suppers or in guilty consciousnesses.

If the Exchange failed to fulfil all its possibilities in some directions, it did unforeseen duty in others, especially supplying an oft-felt want in

the open door which it soon offered to the passing stranger.

Simpkinsville had never boasted a hotel, and so it naturally came about that, in the common parlance of the village, travellers understood that "at the Exchange they could get comfortably et an' slep'" for a reasonable consideration. This was robbing no one, as previously it had been an unwritten law of hospitality of the town that strangers be entertained gratis. It seemed odd that its leading family, that which not only lent the dignity of its solitary gabled front to its highest eminence, but had bequeathed to Simpkinsville its name and traditions, should have been first to put a price on the bread broken with a stranger, but such is the irony of fate; for, with a sensitiveness revealed to the close observer by the slight pursing of their lips, which perhaps the wayfarer interpreted as having a mercenary

meaning, these two old ladies did actually charge him twenty-five cents who consumed a hearty meal, reducing the bill with minute scrupulousness to fifteen, and even to ten cents, to such as failed in appetite. Further their most rigorous consciences did not lead them, as they agreed it was "wuth a dime to cook things an' then not see 'em et."

That they were sensitive to their changed social relations through the ever-present atmosphere of trade was evinced by a conversation one night, when Miss Sophia Falena broke a long silence by saying: "Sis hun, I been figurin' to see how we can contrive to move the Exchange out 'n the parlor. When we *do* have outside comp'ny, I declare I hate to set 'em 'round that centre table piled up with sech as we been raised to offer our comp'ny free—an' it fo' sale. Time the Jenkses

come in last week, an' we sat round so solemcholy, every now 'n' ag'in glancin' at the table which was covered up with mosquito-nettin', I vow if the thing did n't seem to me like some sort o' corpse, an' 's if we were some way holdin' a wake over it, an' ought n't to laugh out loud."

Her sister chuckled nervously: "It 's funny, sis, but, d' you know, I thought about that too—an' maybe I ought n't to say it, but it 'minded me o' pore Sonny's buryin'—an' ma's an' pa's. But I don't see how we can help it. We might clear off the table entire, an' put the bread and rolls on shelves. I never knew of no dead person bein' laid on a shelf—not literal, though the way they 're forgot they might 's well be."

"Let 's do it, sis, an' get shet o' that ghostly covered table. Maybe you did n't take notice to it, but last Sadday when ol' Mis' Perkins sidled up to the table so stately an' raised

up the nettin', she said the identical pertic'lar word that she said time she taken a last look at Sonny. 'Jes' as nachel as life,' says she, jest so. Of co'se she was referrin' to Inez Bowman's case o' wax fruits, but it gimme the cold shivers to see her standin' there ag'in a-sayin' them same words. An' they 's another thing strikes me, sis. When a day or a night boa'der *do* drop in, it seems to me the house mus' seem sort o' gloomy with nobody in it but a lot o' dead glass-eyed stuffed birds an' two old ladies—which you know to outsiders we are, sis—an' them dressed in black solid as Egyp'. Seem to me it 's enough to sort o' take away a travellin' man's appetite. How 'd it do fo' you an' me to baste a little white ruchin' in the neck an' sleeves o' our black comp'ny dresses—not meanin' no disrespec's to the dead, but in compliment to the livin' ?"

"Well, ef you say so, sis hun. Seem like our first duty *is* to the livin'. Maybe ef we *do* lighten our mo'nin' a little these worldly drummers an' sech won't feel called to talk religion to us like they do. I can see it comes purty hard on 'em."

"An' I declare, maybe it 's foolish, but I *do* wish Tom was n't a black cat. He looks mighty doleful layin' asleep on the hearth of evenin's. A pink ribbon 'roun' his neck would n't look too worldly, would it—not for the pore soulless beast, hun, of course, but for us?"

"Why, no, I reck'n not—or a blue one. The blue bow on my valedict'ry is purty faded, but ef you think it 'd do, why, th' ain't no use in keepin' it no longer. Ef Sonny had o' lived, an' married—which, for a man, as long as they 's life they 's hope—they might in time o' been sech as would care for they ol'

auntie's valedict'ry. That ribbon cost five dollars a yard, in Confed'rit money, an' 't ain't all silk, neither—but for a cat—"

" 'T ain't any too good fo' Tom, sis. He 's been a faithful ol' cat. But they 's another p'int on my mind. Don't you think maybe we better open up Sonny's room, an' sun it good, an' reg'late it, so 's ef we 're pushed fo' room we could let comp'ny go up there to sleep? As 't is, we can't sleep mo' 'n three strangers *no* way, an' if a crowd *was* to come—not thet they 're likely—but I b'lieve ef we 'd do it, we 'd be relieved ourselves. As long as we keep it shet tight, jest the way Sonny left it, we 'll feel like death is locked in—an' I don't know as it 's Christian. What you say, sis?"

" Well, maybe you 're right, dearie. S'pose we go up in the mornin' together. I 've done

started up there three times a'ready, an' my knees trembled so they give way under me—but if you was with me, maybe— You don't s'pose strangers would mind sleepin' with so many birds, do you ?"

"Cert'n'y not. Why should they, less'n maybe they was high-strung, an' their minds got excited ? Ef so, they *might* imagine they was all singin' at once-t, quick as the light was out. If *sech* a person was to try to sleep there—well, I dunno. They 's thirty-one hundred an' sixty-three stuffed birds in that garret room, an' all in sight o' the bed."

"Shucks, sis! you 're talkin' *re*-dic'lous—I vow ef you ain't! D' you s'pose any right-minded man would think o' sech as that ? Of course we ain't goin' to put no skittish person to sleep in Sonny's room noway—jest reel gen'lemen, an' only them ef we 're pushed."

"It cert'n'y do behoove us to take

in all we can, hones', sis, for seem like the Exchange money don't mo' 'n, to say, hardly pay our boa'd somehow."

The truth was, the profits of bread-making were steadily shrinking. Not only did Teddy Brooks's loaves grow larger and larger as he waxed paler and more careworn, but among the "customers" of the Exchange there was scarce one whose circumstances did not seem to the old ladies an appeal for generosity—hardly one who was not, as they said, "mo' in need 'n we are."

It would have been a hopelessly weary business but for its rich perquisites in opportunities of sympathy and helpfulness.

The spacious garret chamber was thrown open none too soon, as only a week later it was called into unexpected requisition through the arrival, late one evening, of a party of five dust-begrimed travellers, whom

the ladies would have feared to receive had they not been accompanied by a neighbor, who had taken charge of their horses, and who, in a whispered aside, announced them as "Uncle Sam's men, with a-plenty o' greenbacks," adding, *sotto-voce*, with a wink: "Kill the fatted calf for 'em, an' then charge 'em with a cow."

While the strangers sat at supper that night it was pathetic to see the solicitous scrutiny with which their hostesses scanned their faces in turn, eager for some sign by which to decide who of them all should be counted worthy to sleep in Sonny's bed. A chance remark settled the question.

"Well," said one, "I believe we are in the land of the myrtle and orange."

"Hardly," rejoined another; "but, better yet, we are in the country of the night-singing mock-

ing-bird. Do you ladies ever hear them at night ?" he added.

"From the upstairs bedroom," replied both sisters at once, while Miss Sophia continued:

"The winders open ri-ight out into the maginolia-trees, where they set and sing all night long some ni-ights."

The stranger's eyes beamed. "How delightful! If one might be so fortunate!" he replied, with a rising inflection, smiling.

"It 's yore room, sir, for the night," said Miss Sophia, exchanging glances with her sister; "with whichever one o' the other gentlemen you choose. They 's a wide easy-sleepin' bed in it, a-plenty broad fo' two."

"An' if you want to hear the birds sing," added Sarey Mirandy, "jest open any winder you like. They 's four, not countin' the dormers, and they all open into trees,

an' every tree 's full of birds' nests."

"Is n't that rather remarkable? Are all the trees here full of nests?" the stranger asked.

"No, sir. Sonny—Mr. Stephen Decatur Simpkins, our brother thet 's passed away—he had a gift. He got 'em to nestin' there."

"He was a lover of birds—do I understand?"

The sisters exchanged glances again, and Miss Sarey answered, simply, "Yas, sir. He was a nachelist."

"Ah, indeed!"

Around the speaker's mouth played that ghost of a smile which, being interpreted, means amused incredulity, while the conversation, becoming general, passed to other things.

With such an introduction, an hour later, Mr. John Saunders, of the Smithsonian Institution, of Wash-

ington City, accompanied by his associate Ezra Cox, proceeded, candle in hand, to the modest roof chamber that held the lifework of Stephen Decatur Simpkins, naturalist.

The next morning, though the twins appeared at breakfast in their spick white-ruched dresses, and Tom sauntered around the table resplendent in a blue neck ribbon, the ends of which hung to his knees, a distinct depression marked the spirit of the household. Despite their best efforts in the direction of cheerfulness, the twins were haggard and wan. The eyes of their guests, on the contrary, beamed with pleasure.

In the first interval of silence, after serving the dishes, Miss Sarey Mirandy, turning to the occupants of the room above, asked, timidly:

"May I ask, sir, what perfession you gen'lemen perfess?"

"Certainly, madam," replied Saunders, his eye twinkling. "The

three at your left, Messrs. Green, Brown, and Black—men of color, you perceive—are members of the National Geological Survey, whom Congress has sent out here to hunt up some mineral specimens. My friend here, Mr. Cox, and I—my name is Saunders—are from the Smithsonian Institution at Washington City, at present loafers, as we are off on a vacation. We are called scientists, I believe. Naturalists is a name we like better, but really"—he hesitated for a moment as if to gain entire seriousness—"here, in the presence of your brother's beautiful work, we should appropriate the name timidly, with heads uncovered. Is this collection of birds known in the State, may I ask?"

"Well, yes, sir. I reck'n 't is. 'T ain't never been to say *hid.* It 's been right here. Th' 'aint nobody, black nur white, in the county, but *knows* they 're here."

"It is not registered. I know of all the important recorded collections in America. I wonder if you ladies realize what a treasure you possess? My friend and I studied it until our candle burned out. Then we crept down and begged those of our friends, and burned them up—besides one we found in the dining-room. I hope we did n't disturb you ladies?"

The sisters exchanged glances and colored.

"Th' was n't to say 'xactly noise enough to disturb nobody, sir, ef we 'd knew what it was, but th' ain't nobody slep' up in Sonny's room sence he passed away tell now, an' the sound of every footfall seemed like him back ag'in. So we nachelly kep' listenin' for 'em to stop, an' to tell the whole truth, sir, when we heard 'em so late, not knowin' nothin' 'bout you gentlemen, we got nervous an' scared like, 'n' we got

up an' dressed, an' set up the live night long, 'th our vallibles all in reach—not thet you gentlemen look like peddlers, which even if you was, you might be hones'."

The professional gentlemen present thought it unsafe to look at one another, while they expressed the sincere sorrow they felt at so unfortunate a misunderstanding. The occasion of their late hours, however, soon became the absorbing theme, resulting in a full restoration of confidence. Saunders's enthusiasm was genuine.

"I actually counted sixty-one beautiful specimens not existing in any registered collection," he said, addressing his companions.

"An' they was n't all easy got, neither," replied Miss Sophia. "Why, Sonny slep' in a crape-myrtle tree ev'ry night for a week once-t, jest to find out how a little he bird conduct hisself — ef he

changed places with his settin' wife, or jest entertained 'er sett'n' on a limb beside her."

Her interlocutor smiled. "And how was it—do you remember?"

"Well, reely—how was it, sis?"

"'Deed, sir, I disremember. Either he did 'r he did n't—one. I clean forget, but—but it 's put down in the book."

"So there is a book?"

"They 's five leather-backed books, sir, with nothin' but sech as that *in* 'em. Sis an' me 've read in 'em some, an' for anybody that *cared* for sech, I s'pose it 's good readin'. They 's *one* thing, it 's *true*, an' thet 's more 'n you can say fo' the triflin' novels thet folks pizens their minds *an'* principles with."

"You have indeed a valuable possession here, ladies. Have you ever thought of selling it?"

"Sellin' Sonny's birds? No, sir. No mo' 'n we 'd sell pa an' ma's

ile-painted po'traits, or Sonny's Confed'rit clo'es, *ragged* as they be."

"No, sir. They 's some things thet money don't tech. We would n't sell them birds, not if we got ten cents a head for 'em, an' that 's mo' 'n most of 'em 'd be wuth even if they was baked in a pie—'n' the crust an' gravy throwed in."

"But, my dear ladies," said Mr. Cox, "they are worth far more than that. As a collection they are worth considerably more than a dollar apiece—"

"Sis," said Miss Sarey Mirandy, "the gentleman don't understand. Them birds, sir, ain't nothin' but feathers an' skin, an' it full o' rank pizen arsenic. Th' ain't a blessed thing in 'em but raw cotton, an' it physicked, an' nine out 'n every ten of 'em never was no 'count for either cookin' nur singin'. We would n't deceive you *'bout* 'em. But if they was birds o' Paridise, caught before

the fall o' Adam, jest swooned away, an' li'ble to come back to life any minute, 'n' you offered us the United States Mint for 'em, even so, th' ain't for sale—*noways.*"

This was somewhat of a rebuff to the first overture of the Washington scientist, who indeed seriously meant that the Institution should become possessed of the new-found treasure, if possible. He had inserted the edge of a wedge, however, and was satisfied to wait before pressing it.

Breakfast over, it was but natural that Miss Sophia should follow the visitors into the parlor, while she, with evident and pathetic pride, exhibited the additional specimens there. When, a half-hour later, she rejoined her sister in the kitchen, she was so full to overflowing of this tender theme that some time elapsed before she remarked, in a tone betraying a secondary interest:

"Well, I reck'n Sally Ann 'll have

her swingin' pitcher, after all, 'cause I 've done sol' the candelabras."

Miss Sarey stood kneading dough, with her back to her sister. She came near falling for a moment.

"Wh—what you say, honey? H—who bought—*what?*"

She kept on kneading, and did not turn.

"That slim, light-complected one, I say, has done bought ol' Mis' Brooks's candelabras, 'n' I mus' say I never sol' a thing with a worse grace. I 'm a-puttin' the ten dollars which he give for 'em here in this pink vase on the dinin'-room mantel, an' do you give it to Sally Ann, honey. I don't want nothin' to do *with* it, nor with her neither. She gets me riled enough to all but backslide 'th her 'xtravagance 'n' super*flu*ousniss!"

Miss Sarey had not realized until now how attached she had herself become to the old candlesticks.

Their shimmering prisms were crystallized memories. Themselves, their long-familiar fantastic shapes, were friends antedating in association any surviving friendship.

When she had completed her task, great beads of perspiration stood upon her pale brow. Passing out, she nervously seized the ten dollars and hastened to the parlor. The purchaser stood admiring his new possession. Laying the money before him, she said, with a masterful effort at composure:

"They 's been a mistake made, sir. Them candelabras is already sold."

"Indeed? I 'm sorry," he said, bowing; and as she moved away, he added, "I should be glad to give five times the price—if they could be secured."

Miss Sarey Mirandy hesitated. "Sir?"

There was something almost tragic

in the apprehension expressed in this one word.

The offer was repeated.

Fifty dollars! Half her secret hoard! In a twinkling the sum resolved itself into a difference in the quality of a shroud and coffin. Without apparent hesitation she replied, firmly: "The lady thet 's bought 'em don't ca'culate to sell 'em. Thank you, sir." And, her old heart thumping absurdly, she went out.

Declining the fifty dollars had seemed a simple matter of decision and principle at the moment, and the offer a bribe to her loyalty; but all day, as she moved about the house, her secret kept growing, first naturally from the germ, as the extravagance seemed to grow in enormity, and then by accretion, as one by one the sundry deceptions it would involve gathered about it.

Of course, she would deal fair.

Sally Ann should have the fifty dollars. But this soon became the slightest consideration. She must not be known as the purchaser, not even to her sister. If she had n't told her of that long-ago kiss, it would be different. Sally Ann would naturally tell every one the price she got, and she would ask questions.

For the first time in her life she was shamefaced and afraid, responding even to her sister's enthusiastic remarks about Sonny in an incoherent manner. In the midst of her greatest apprehension the front gate was heard to slam, and Sally Ann Brooks did actually appear coming up the path. Seeing her enter, however, Miss Sophia said:

"Sis, you set Sally Ann down in the parlor and talk to her, honey. I 'm 'feared if I 'd see her tickled over that ten dollars I might not be perlite. Maybe, if a more Christian

spirit comes to me, I 'll come in after whiles; but it 's mos' supper-time, anyhow."

As she passed through the parlor to receive Mrs. Brooks, Miss Sarey was astounded to perceive the "red-complected" coveter of the candelabra still standing before them. If the devious ways of deceit had been an old-travelled road to her, her dilemma would have been less trying. Not to introduce those who chanced to meet in her parlor would be a social dereliction of which she was incapable. To do so in the present instance would invite disaster.

She did not hesitate. Come what would, she would be a lady worthy the name of Simpkins. What she said at the door was, "Walk right in the parlor, Sally Ann, an' I 'll make you 'quainted with a gen'leman that 's here from the North."

"Law, Miss Simpkins!" exclaimed Teddy's wife, shrinking

back. "I 'ain't got on no corset nor nothin'. I jest run over in my Mother Hubbard as I was. I would n't go before a strange gentleman the way I am, nohow, for nothin'."

Miss Sarey Mirandy was saved. Trembling within, and with two solferino spots upon her thin cheeks, she invited her guest into her own room.

"We hear you 've got a house full o' Yankees," said the guest, taking a rocking-chair; "but Mr. Jakes says they 're real ni-ice, an' he says the way they 're a-praisin' up Mr. Sonny Simpkins roun' town you 'd think he might o' been George Washin'ton, or maybe Jef Davis hisself."

"Yas, Sally Ann. It 's been mighty gratifyin' to sis an' me to hear them a-praisin' of Sonny. One of 'em 's been a-studyin' over Sonny's books the livelong day."

"Is that so? If they read them

books, they mus' shorely be educated. Kitty Clark's beau says they been a-telegraphin' all day to Washin'ton City—an' he says the name o' Simpkins has gone over the wire more 'n once-t, though neither he nor she nor I got any right to tell it. Three of 'em, you know, 's been out to Mr. Jakes's farm all day a-spyin' dug-up things with a spy-glass. Mr. Jakes is diggin' a new cow-pond, an' they do say he 's dug up enough to undo the whole Bible. That 's the way the talk 's a-goin', but I 'm thankful to say I was raised a good 'Piscopal Church woman—not sayin' nothin' 'g'inst the Baptists, Miss Simpkins — an' the Prayer-book don't, in no place, *I* ever opened it, make no mention o' Mr. Jakes's cow-pond, nor the ins an' outs of it. An' talkin' 'bout the Church, Miss Simpkins, fetches me to what brought me here—not that I needed any excuse; but this is Lent, you

know, in our Church, an' we 're 'xpected to make some sort o' sacrerfice—if not fastin', some other —an' I thought, 'stid o' denyin' myself spring onions or maybe choc'let, since Teddy's mind seems to run on 'em consider'ble, I 'd come over an' get them candelabras o' his ma's an' set 'em back on the mantel where she left 'em. Don't you think the Lord might take that the way it 's meant, for a Lenten off'rin' ?"

"I do indeed, Sally Ann, an' a good one." And she added, in a moment, "'Cause you know, honey, they *might* o' sold for what 'd fetch considerable worldly vanities."

"Yes, 'm, so they might, tho' I doubt if th' ever would."

A moment's silence followed, broken finally by Miss Sarey.

"But I 'd advise you, Sally Ann, child, to examine yore deed purty close-t before you offer it to the dear

Lord, 'cause you know, honey, He sees the inside *inness* o' all our purposes. Suppose somebody, now, was to offer to buy them candelabras 'n' pay a big price, cash down. How 'bout Lent, honey ?"

The old lady's heart was thumping furiously.

"Well, Miss Simpkins, tell the truth, *they could n't get 'em*—not if they offered me the first price of 'em." Teddy Brooks's wife's eyes filled with tears as she continued: "Teddy seems right porely these days, Miss Simpkins. An' another thing I come to ask you was if you had any more o' that blackberry wine o' yores left. It helped him a heap las' spring. Some days I get so worreted the way he seems a-failin'. Seem like if he 'd get good 'n' strong, I would n't care fo' nothin' else."

When Miss Sarey went for the wine, she moved with the alacrity of

a happier and younger woman than she who had entered the room ten minutes before.

For the first time in years she kissed Teddy's wife at parting, and bade her "keep good heart, an' not forgit the good Lord loved her an' hers." And as she turned to go in, she drew a long free breath as she said to herself, "An' yet some folks 'll set up an' say th' ain't no sech a thing as a special providence."

The entertaining of five strange college-bred men, who talked familiarly of things beyond their ken, albeit the bird theme was a bond of sympathy between them, was a somewhat formidable undertaking to these old timid women of narrow and hitherto protected lives, though they had congratulated themselves many times to-day that "the household was perpared for 'em, even down to Tom."

When supper was over to-night,

and Mr. Saunders, with a formality that was significant, begged an interview with the ladies in the parlor, they were seized anew with a vague distrust.

These Yankee men who wore the United States initials "promiscuous" about their persons, and made so free with the telegraph, might be —what? Spies? Detectives?

Neither confided to the other what, in truth, was but a suspicion of a suspicion, as they repaired together to their chambers to secure their turkey-tail fans and fresh hemstitched handkerchiefs, and slip bits of orris root into their mouths.

The gentlemen were already assembled, and the meeting lost nothing, but rather gained, in formality on the entrance of the twins, who, bowing slightly, proceeded to seat themselves side by side upon the sofa.

"Ladies," said Mr. Saunders,

rising, "yesterday a party of tired men came to your door asking for supper and a night's lodging. They had come from a distant brilliant city, with its art galleries, its institutions of learning, its glare, its music. Coming into this little inland Arkansas town, they expected to find rich, deep forests, and fertile fields tilled by true-hearted children of the soil. Within your hospitable door they hoped for what Solomon meant when he said, 'A dry morsel, and quietness therewith,' as they were both hungry and tired. Instead of a dry morsel, you have given us sumptuous fare, ladies; and for the quietness we sought, we have found—what shall I say?—the stillness of a temple, where, instead of sleeping, we have since sat in reverence. Two of us have spent a day and half a night in studying the beautiful life-work of Mr. Stephen Decatur Simpkins. Here we have found science,

art, literature, romance, poetry—music, for the birds at our windows have filled the night with melody. There are in the world but two larger personal collections of birds than that we find here. There is none so exquisitely perfect in every detail. I have not found a gunshot in a single specimen, gentlemen, nor a ruffled feather—"

"Th' ain't but thirteen shot birds there," interrupted Miss Sarey Mirandy, "and them was give to Sonny. He spent five years livin' 'mongst 'em, so 's they 'd know 'im, before he ever ketched one."

"All the valuable known collections," resumed John Saunders, "are on exhibition in public institutions. As its representative, ladies, I am authorized to say to you that the United States government wishes to place the work of Mr. Simpkins in the Smithsonian Institution at Washington—"

Simultaneously, as if electrified, the twins rose to their feet. Miss Sophia first found voice. What she said, in a quavering tremor, was this:

"If I may please speak, sir, Sonny lived a peaceful an' law-abidin' citizen clean sence the wah—an' he hed n't no more hard feelin's to them he fit ag'in 'n we 've got—not a bit. If, after all these years, the North see fit to converscate his pore voiceless birds thet show *theyselves* how harmless Sonny spent his time —not havin' even to say a shot *in* 'em—why, all we got to ask is jest wait a few more years, till two ol' women pass away, an' then, why, if the North cares for 'em, they 'll be nobody lef' to claim 'em."

As she sat down, her sister spoke:

"Them words we let fall to you Northerners 'bout Sonny's Confed'rit uniform was n't intended fo' no insult to you gen'lemen. We jest prize it, bein' his sisters, 'cause

seem like it 's got all his young shape in it yet—that 's all. Th 'ain't a livin' bit o' strife mixed in our feelin's 'bout it—not a bit. That 's all we got to say, I reck'n—ain't it, sis ?"

John Saunders was not the only man present who found it necessary to use his handkerchief before he could trust his voice again. There was a very tender note in it when he said:

"I have blundered shamefully, my dear ladies, and I beg you to forgive me. Your brother's property is yours. No power on earth can take it from you. The war and confiscation are no more. Were Mr. Simpkins living, he could desire no greater honor than national recognition as one of America's first naturalists. This is what we would accord him now. His work lies buried in this little town. In the national museum thousands will visit it daily. His portrait will hang beside it, and his

poetic and exhaustive treatises adorn the public libraries. These books alone, describing numerous hitherto unclassified specimens, and giving original methods of capture and preservation, are worth several thousand dollars. I am not yet authorized to name a specified sum. We cannot always pay as we should like to, but I can guarantee that to the estate of Mr. Stephen Decatur Simpkins the United States will pay certainly not less than ten thousand dollars for the collection entire; it ought to be double that. We feel quite sure that when you ladies fully understand, you will not let any feeling stand in the way of his getting his full honor."

For answer the sisters turned to each other, opened their arms, and fell sobbing each upon the other's shoulder. Thus they sat for some moments, and when they raised their heads they were alone.

"I hope," said Miss Sophia, wiping her eyes, "I hope pa an' ma 's been a-lookin' on an' a-list'nin', sis. 'T would make 'em happier even in Heaven."

"Yas; an' Sonny too, dearie; I hope he 's been present, though I doubt if he 'd care so much. I b'lieve he 'd 'a' cared more to be upstairs las' night a-studyin' the birds with them gen'lemen."

"I reck'n you 're right, sis, an' maybe he was. I don't b'lieve the good Lord 'd hinder 'im if he wanted to come."

If some supposed the fortune coming to the Misses Simpkins would prove a death-blow to the Exchange, they were mistaken. A comfortable income gave its machinery just the lubrication it needed for smooth and happy working according to the pleasure of its proprietors.

Three years have passed since

Sonny's collection of birds went to Washington, and every spring the sisters plan to go East to visit it at the Institution; but each season finds Teddy Brooks "lookin' so porely" that Miss Sarey Mirandy finds an excuse to put it off. When pressed, she did even say once to her sister:

"Though Sally Ann is growin' in grace every day, an' 'll make a fine woman in time if she lives, you can't put a ol' head on young shoulders; an', like as not, before we 'd be half-way to Washin'ton she 'd run out o' light bread an' feed Teddy on hoe-cake, which always was same as pizen to 'im even in his young days."

THE END

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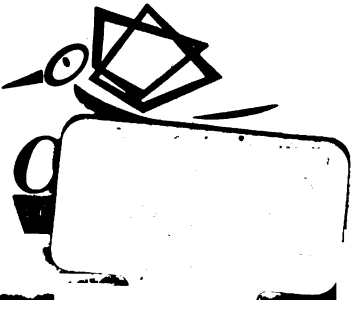
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